

Legal Action for Women

Crossroads Women's Centre PO Box 287 London NW6 5QU

Tel: 020 7482 2496 minicom/voice Fax: 020 7209 4761

E-mail: law@crossroadswomen.net

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ASYLUM SEEKERS TELL REFUGEE COUNCIL: WE REFUSE HOMELESSNESS & DESTITUTION

**HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL LOBBY
FRIDAY 4 JULY 2003, 8.30-12 noon**

Venue: Refugee Council One Stop Shop, Ferndale Road, Brixton

Women and men claiming asylum, many of whom are homeless and destitute, and supporters will lobby the Refugee Council to demand that it adhere to its founding principles and defend human rights not inhumane government policies.

**Contact: Niki Adams, Legal Action for Women 020-7482 2496 or 07956 316899
Email: law@crossroadswomen.net**

Since the government privatised state services to asylum seekers passing them to the voluntary sector, the Refugee Council (RC) and five other organizations now administer housing, "support" and forced dispersal on behalf of the Home Office's National Asylum Support Service (NASS). This embedding of NGOs with the government has brought a sharp increase in destitution and homelessness to individuals and families claiming asylum. In the last three months alone, over 100 women, some with infants, from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and other African countries have come to LAW, Black Women's Rape Action Project and Women Against Rape's Asylum from Rape Project, describing the torture and indignity they now face in the UK. At least 10, some with children, are sleeping rough, in churches, under stairwells or on friend's floors.

This is what the RC is doing to those it is supposed to help:

1. ***Evicting women, including rape survivors and mothers with children, and men from its offices and leaving them to sleep on the streets in the rain.***
The RC told one group of nine to go to the police for housing. The police turned them away, saying "The Home Office made you homeless." Women frightened to sleep on the street, were told: "Citizens also have to sleep rough." In desperation, they staged a sit-in at the RC One Stop Shop but at 7.45pm were evicted with one blanket, some Pot Noodles (useless without hot water), cereal and milk. We found hostel beds but the RC refused to authorize payment.
2. ***Enforcing forced dispersal which makes people vulnerable to racist attacks, isolating them from vital support.*** Rape survivors are denied counselling and medical treatment. One mother with three young children was so terrorized by racist attacks she returned to London – the whole family is now sleeping on a friend's floor.
3. ***Putting vulnerable women in mixed, dilapidated, dirty and dangerous slum housing.*** Many women describe hostels as "prisons". Some have reported being raped or sexually assaulted in them. Despite publicly acknowledging the problem, the RC continues to place women in mixed accommodation where even the toilets are shared with men. It then refers

rape victims to Women Against Rape (whose funding has been cut because it defends *all* rape victims)!

4. **Forcing hundreds of people to queue from 4 or 5am outside its One-Stop Shop in Brixton in order to seek help.** One woman was told to come at 2am! Even then, many of those who get seen get useless advice or no advice at all.

Thousands of people have been left homeless with no income because of Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration & Asylum Act, which denies all support to those who do not claim within 24 hours of entering the country, regardless of circumstances. **Ian Macdonald QC, foremost authority on British immigration law and retired head of the distinguished Two Garden Court Chambers, says:** *“Section 55 is clearly aimed at discouraging refugee claimants by threatening them with destitution and homelessness. It is against the spirit and aims of the UN Refugee Convention and the body of law which has grown up over the past 50 years, and undermines a person’s basic human rights. It is also an obvious and deplorable attempt by the government to shuffle off its international responsibilities to persons fleeing persecution.”*

A rape survivor from Somalia who as a teenager saw both her parents killed in front of her and fled to the UK after being detained and gang-raped by militia, says: *“I have nowhere to sleep, nothing to eat. In London people think we lead nice lives but it is not true. The government spends money on machine guns while we have no food or housing. I fear more now than I did in Somalia. I had nowhere to turn for help but the RC, but all they gave me was empty promises.”*

A LAW spokeswoman says: *“The RC is justifying making people homeless and destitute because the law says they are not entitled to help. A charity which was founded to help people fleeing torture and persecution and whose annual budget is now £70m, should not be complicit in such brutal and inhumane treatment. We understand that Refugee Action, one of the five main NGOs involved has recently decided not to renew its contract with NASS. Why aren’t the others organisations doing the same?”*

The Human Rights for All Lobby demands:

- **Immediate housing and support** for all those who are homeless and destitute as a result of Section 55 or other legislation.
- **Health care and other support for women and children who are particularly vulnerable** because they are rape victims, pregnant, breastfeeding mothers, older, have mental or physical disabilities.
- **Re-housing for all women from accommodation where they feel under threat.**
- **The Refugee Council and other NGOs must withdraw** from administering the inhumane and discriminatory dispersal and accommodation system
- **Abolition of the racist two-tier system** which impoverishes asylum seekers and forces many into slums or homelessness. Individuals and families claiming asylum must be given benefits and housing like everyone else in need.
- **An end to all forced dispersals.**
- **The right to work for asylum seekers** so they are not impoverished.
- **The government must recognize rape as persecution and torture** and therefore grounds for asylum.